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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000468

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, SA/PD, S/CT, NEA/NGA,
DS/DSS/ITA, INR/NESA; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KPAO](#) [ASEC](#) [CE](#) [MV](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: TFI01: Low-key reaction in Sri Lanka/Maldives to start of military operations

Refs: (A) FBIS Reston Va DTG 200727Z Mar 03

- (B) State 72921
- (C) State 72913
- (D) Colombo 463
- (E) Colombo 460, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador E. Ashley Wills.

Reasons: 1.5 (B,D).

1. (S) SUMMARY: General reaction in Sri Lanka and the Maldives to the start of military operations against Iraq has been low-key, so far. The PM has asked to see the Ambassador late today. Sri Lanka's envoy to the U.S. called the Ambassador earlier, and said the GSL plans to issue a "helpful" statement re the situation. Latest demarche re Iraqi intel officials has been conveyed to the GSL. Media coverage continues to be heavy. A test of local reaction will come after Muslim prayers on March 21. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) INTERACTIONS WITH GSL: Prime Minister Wickremesinghe has invited Ambassador Wills to see him late today. The PM almost certainly wants to discuss the developing situation. We will brief Department after the meeting.

3. (C) In the meantime, Sri Lankan Ambassador to the U.S. Devinda Subasinghe called Ambassador Wills early March 20 (before the actual commencement of military operations) and said the GSL was planning on issuing a "helpful" statement re the Iraq situation. (Note: The PM had also told the Ambassador this on March 19 -- See Ref E.) Subasinghe said domestic political (e.g., Muslim) sensitivities and other complexities (specifically President Kumaratunga's likely objections) would prevent the GSL from actually coming out and publicly joining the U.S.-led coalition of the willing.

4. (S) Per Ref B, Mission has conveyed the latest demarche pressing for the expulsion of Iraqi officials and the closure of the regime's embassy to the GSL. We will continue to press government interlocutors re this high-priority matter.

5. (C) SRI LANKA REACTION: The news that military operations had commenced broke in Sri Lanka just before 9:00 am, March 20. Most Sri Lankans were already at work at this point and traffic continued to proceed normally in Colombo. There have been no reports of disturbances. Mission has been in touch with contacts in mainly Muslim areas of the east and Puttalam District north of Colombo, and they report that the situation is quiet. There was a demonstration by Muslims north of Batticaloa town early March 20, but it reportedly ended peacefully. Per Ref D, an anti-U.S. rally is slated to take place in Colombo after Muslim prayers on Friday, March 21, and we have heard of some other rallies at other sites in country. (Note: Mission held an EAC on March 20 -- see Septel. The police have contacted RSO and promised unequivocal cooperation. DCM is also scheduled to attend a briefing for the diplomatic corps given by the Interior Minister late March 20. The briefing will focus on the local security situation.) (Note: Mission has just received a report attributed to AFP that someone in the Opposition People's Alliance called President Bush a "war criminal." We are looking into the report, which is contained in Ref A.)

6. (C) MALDIVES REACTION: In a conversation focused on other subjects, Polchief asked Dr. Shaheed, the Permanent Secretary of the Maldivian MFA, about the situation in Male. Shaheed said all was quiet, noting that he did not expect any rallies or demonstrations to take place. Poloff also spoke to Minh Pham (Amcit--pls protect), the UN coordinator for the Maldives, who confirmed that the situation was quiet. Pham added that many Maldivians were watching news of the developing situation on CNN and BBC. His overall impression was

that Maldivians did not support the war, but were "resigned" to it. The government website "Haveeru" contained AFP wire service reports re the situation, but no commentary.

17. (U) MEDIA COVERAGE: The front-pages of Sri Lanka's newspapers were full of stories re the Gulf situation on March 20, although the latest news re the ongoing Sri Lankan peace talks was also given significant coverage. The start of the military campaign took place after papers were published, so most Iraq-related articles in March 20 editions focused on the runup to war. After the war started, TV stations were full of news re the situation. Conforming to the general anti-U.S. slant of many press pieces here, an editorial in the Opposition English-language ISLAND entitled "From Satyr to Martyr?" stated:

"This war is not only bound to bring about radical changes in the politics of Iraq and that of the Middle East...It will also turn the new political order that was taking shape after the Cold War topsy turvy (as the) the democratic idealism that gradually came to the forefront in US foreign policy (is)...replaced with sheer militarism and disregard for international law and the UN. The world can only hope that what is happening is an aberration." (Note: See Ref D for additional text from this editorial.)

18. (C) COMMENT: At this point, our sense is that Sri Lankans are just absorbing the news that war has begun and are collecting their thoughts. Our best educated guess is that the situation will remain relatively calm here primarily for the good reason that Sri Lanka has plenty of other fish to tandoori. A test will come after Muslim prayers on Friday, March 21, when religious extremists and leftists will try to bring out crowds and test the government's commitment to keep the situation under control. END COMMENT.

19. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS